

Tasting Success

Junior Chefs Scramble for Top Honors

by T. Anthony Bell
Fort Lee Traveller

Fort Lee, Va. -- For many of the participants in the 2007 Junior Chef of the Year competition, the prospect of presenting their best culinary creations to four gray-haired, world-renown master chefs with European accents could be daunting.

"At first, I must say, I was expecting that my posterior would be handed to me," said Spc. Patrick Alveranga, the U.S. Army Reserve representative in the competition. "But they were actually very nurturing to us in a sense that they told us what we did right, what we did wrong and how to improve. To me that is very good because they did not try to come down on you too hard."

Alveranga was one of 14 contestants who faced an equivalent of a culinary firing squad in this category of the Army Culinary Arts Competition that showcases the talent and skills of the military's best junior food service specialists, but with less-than-deadly results.

"We've all been competitors and (competitors) don't want to hear that their work is no good or whatever," said Klaus Friedenreich, a German-educated American Culinary Federation chef of the year with more than 30 years experience. "We try to be encouraging not discouraging."

The competition requires that participants in the grade of E-4 and below prepare and cook a three-course



PHOTOS BY T. ANTHONY BELL

Team Alaska's Spc. Matthew Flemister tastes his creation during the Junior Chef of the year competition March 6.

meal, typically an entrée, desert and soup or salad in four hour's time. It is graded in two phases – kitchen techniques and tasting – with a grading weight of 40 percent and 60 percent, respectively.

During the kitchen phase, students must demonstrate the finer points of food handling and sanitation, cooking technique and more importantly, organizational skills.

"A lot of times when you come into a competition or show, you are working in a kitchen you're not accustomed to," said Frank Abbinanti, a former Disneyworld executive chef and current restaurant owner who judged the kitchen phase. "It takes a little extra time to find things, to gather things. It's a totally different environment. Usually, the competitor who is the best organized... does a lot better."

Those who are organized also manage time better. Just ask Fort Sill's Spc. Rickey Jones. Jones, one of several who hurried and scurried

around the kitchen in the last hour to make the deadline, said the four-time limit provided a false sense of security.

"I was...thinking that four hours is a lot of time to prepare a meal," he recalled, "but really every hour, every minute and every second counts."

The same held true for second-year competitor Spc. Jarred Wilson of Fort Carson. Wilson sported a broad smile the first three hours of the contest but put on a serious game face in the last hour.

"I saw the time slipping away, and I had to speed up," he said. "I still made it; I just had to make sure I didn't miss it or I would've lost a lot of points."

After rushing to ensure the food was hot, garnish in place and crumbs placed neatly back into their place, the dishes were rushed to a judging room where the four taste judges attired in chef's smocks sat at a long table.

The dishes were placed on the judging table, and the participants left the room as required.

Now the food was at the mercy of the judges. Friedenreich said his job was simple.

"I'm looking for good food," said the culinary ambassador at The Art Institutes in Florida.

Friedenreich and the other judges specifically take note of such details as presentation, serving method, portion size, creativity and of course, taste.

"Flavor, taste and texture is most of the criteria," he said.

After the judges sampled the dishes, the contestants were called in for their critique. Many of them appeared relieved, ready to take in the evaluation – good or bad. None of them left feeling that they didn't accomplish something.

"I just learned so much," said Jones, who said the judges were enthused with his work. "There are so many people here who have so many talents and so many who want to teach you. You can't go wrong."

Wilson said the nurturing, learning atmosphere of the competition is something he looked forward to.

"All you have to do is ask a question," he said. "There are so many chefs around here who are willing to help. They come around trying to help."

The winner of the juniorchefoftheyear competition will not be announced until March 16. That is when all winners of the 2007 U.S. Army Culinary Arts Competition will be revealed at an awards ceremony.



For more culinary competition photos and articles, visit www.ima.lee.army.mil/sites/pao/2007_CulinaryComp_Dailies/about.htm



(ABOVE) Team Korea's Pfc. Ashley Winningham mixes ingredients during the Junior Chef of the Year competition March 6.

(LEFT) Team Hawaii's Pfc. Donna Major prepares mushrooms for cooking during the Junior Chef of the Year competition March 6.